DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 086 CG 018 288

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TITLE Training Moral Reasoning without Training Morality.
PUB DATE 2 May 85
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (57th, Chicago, IL, May 2-4, 1985). Research was aided by a Doctoral Fellowship Award from Northern Illinos University to the second author.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Development; Cognitive Style; Comparative Analysis; Ethics; *High School Freshmen; High Schools; *Moral Development; *Moral Values; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

One common paradigm used to study moral reasoning involves assessing the reasoning leading to choices among alternative actions, each with moral implications. Preconventional reasoning emphasizes external rewards and punishments, conventional reasoning centers on acceptance of societal rules and expectations, and postconventional reasoning is based on abstract, internalized principles of ethical behavior. To address the problems associated with the confusion between reasoning and values in moral reasoning research a group of high school freshmen responded to four nonmoral social judgment tasks. Subjects (N=32) in the training group participated in discussions which led them from simpler to more configural reasoning. Controls (N=32) responded to the same tasks without discussion. All subjects then took a moral choice task involving eight basic scenarios, each providing a choice dilemma involving conflicting moral principles. Comparison between training and control groups revealed that trained subjects were more configural in integrating information about preconventional, conventional, and postconventional outcomes in subsequent moral choice dilemmas. Although trained subjects combined the rationales in a more complex manner than did the controls, there was no tendency for trained subjects to uniformly choose more moral alternatives. These results suggest that reasoning complexity can be directly trained, and trained separately from moral values. Training complex reasoning in nonmoral tasks appeared to avoid the pitfall of inculcating moralistic values. (NRB)

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TRAINING MORAL REASONING WITHOUT TRAINING MORALITY

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ABSTRACT

On consecutive days, high school freshmen responded to four nonmoral social judgment tasks. Discussion guided them from simpler to more configural reasoning. Control subjects took the tasks without discussion. Trained subjects were more configural in integrating information about preconventional, conventional, and postconventional outcomes in subsequent moral dilemma choices. It was concluded that reasoning complexity -- a component of moral development -- can be directly trained, and separately from moral values. By training complex reasoning in nonmoral tasks, the pitfall of inculcating moralistic values was avoided.

Paper presented at the meetings of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, May 2, 1985.

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Research was facilitated by a Doctoral Research Fellow Award from Northern Illinois University to the second author.

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TRAINING MORAL REASONING WITHOUT TRAINING MORALITY

Social development is characterized by stage conceptions, in which people progress through a hierarchical series of stages, ordered in a lawful fashion. In moral judgment, for example, people progress at varying rates through a sequence of stages until some reach the theoretically highest stage (Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1965). Progression is described as lying in the reasoning behind a moral decision, and not in the moral values inherent in the decision.

One common paradigm used to study moral reasoning involves assessing the reasoning leading to choices among alternative actions, each with moral implications ["choice dilemmas" (Kohlberg, 1976)]. The respondant is given a hypothetical situation and must choose between two given actions for the main character, each having positive moral values or rationales. Moral reasoning stage is indexed not by the chosen action but by the reasons selected for the choice from a list provided with the dilemma. These rationales reflect the hierarchical reasoning stages described by Piaget (1965). Preconventional reasoning emphasizes external rewards and punishments as choice rationales, Conventional reasoning centers on acceptance of rules and expectations of significant others in society, and Postconventional reasoning is based on abstract, internalized principles of ethical and just behavior. Kohlberg (1976) later elaborated the model to include six levels, contained within the original three-stage structure.

A second reasoning progression is suggested in Piaget's work: People progress from an absolute consideration of components ("moral realism" or "heteronomous morality") where any component of the choice is unchanging in its importance, to relativistic reasoning ("autonomous reality"), where an element's importance depends on the configuration of other elements. For example, in the former, peer approval would have the same impact on action

choice whether or not the actor is likely to be caught and punished, while in the latter, the impact of peer approval depends on whether punishment or reward occurs, whether an ethical principle is served, and so on. Kohlberg does not agree with this progression from simple to complex reasoning; his highest stage requires acting solely on the basis of absolute principles of justice, regardless of other factors.

There have been criticisms of Kohlberg's theorizing and method of assessing stage by asking for rationales which influenced choices in moral dilemmas (e.g., Kurtines & Greif, 1974). We consider two problems, one methodological, the other conceptual, to be particularly crucial. First, subjects must order potential rationales after making their action choice in a scenario. The rationales are chosen from a shopping list which reflects the range of preconventional to postconventional considerations which could account for each alternative. Undue trust is placed on retrospective reports of influential considerations. Such retrospective accounts may be innacurate due to social desirability pressures, rationalization, and so on. Moreover, people do not always know, nor can they reconstruct the cues and reasons for their social judgments (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Rather than naive reliance on subject reconstruction of their reasoning processes, it is better to observe the judgments made when different rationales are present or absent in a situation, and to infer relative importance of reasoning elements from the strength and pattern of choices made under different rationale conditions.

The second problem strikes at the heart of the developmental conception. While developmentalists distinguish between moral values ("stealing is bad") and reasoning, the distinction is blurred in practice due to unclear operationalizations. There is a link, for one example, between "reasoning" stage and particular values endorsed in Kohlberg's stage system. For another, particular action choices are shown to be associated with a particular level

of rationale retrospectively chosen, i.e, some choices are associated with higher level rationales (Martin, Shafto, & Vandeinse. 1977).

This reasoning/value confusion become particularly troublesome when we consider the widespread use of interventions in schools to advance reasoning reasoning levels. These programs aim to advance moral reasoning (that is, the rationales which guide choices) without tampering with underlying values and ultimate choices. Yet, they typically use guided discussion of moral dilemmas and other morally toned materials. This poses the danger that values will be inclucated during discussion or will polarize in the direction of the most morally preferred and discussed values (Kaplan & Miller, 1983). This very outcome was found for high school freshman who had been subjected to a moral education course. After training, the students made more moralistic dilemma choices than controls, but were not more complex in their reasoning, nor did they place more importance on more advanced rationales (Kaplan, 1983).

This study deals with the several problems in moral development conceptions and practice that were just outlined. First, a clear distinction is made between values and reasoning: The former refers to how good or bad choices and their consequences are for the decision maker, and the latter refers to both the importance of each choice element and the complexity of the manner in which the choice elements are combined. Second, instead of naively relying on introspective reports to determine the importance of rationale elements in a given choice, we provided rationales as part of the dilemma scenarios and observed the degree to which each rationale affected choice. Third, in applying this conception and method to intervention, we deliberately focussed on training reasoning complexity, an aspect of moral reasoning that has been largely ignored in training programs. Fourth, to avoid inculcating values during training, we trained complex reasoning in nonmoral tasks.

METHOD

Subjects.

High school freshmen in two sections of a required speech course (n=32) comprised the training group. Training took place during the class hour. Controls (n=32) were freshmen in study hall.

Procedure

In each of four fifty-minute sessions, on consecutive days, a different social (nonmoral) judgment task was used. All had been previously employed in the first author's research, and each had resulted in nonconfigural averaging of information by college students. In order of usage, these were: (1) Deciding how likely one would be to serve in an experiment given information about experimenter need and subject cost, (2) Judging guilt of a student accused of cheating, based on the student's actions and the severity of penalties, (3) Sentencing a defendant tried for car theft given his motives and the damage to the car, and (4) Attributing suspiciouness to suspects in ficticious murder mysteries given their motives and opportunities. Judgments were collected, and in the training sessions an experimenter described how students commonly use a simple integration rule to combine the two elements in the task. She went on to describe and illustrate more complex integration, guiding the class to discussion of complex (differential weighted averaging) solutions. For example, she led the class to see how, in a murder mystery, one might give less weight to opportunities if motive was weak than if strong. Each session's discussion built upon the complex rules discussed in previous sessions. After the class appeared to understand the principle, they retook the task. Responses were on numerical scales, of the order: "Would definitely not help the experimenter (1)....Would definitely help the experimenter (10)" and "How suspicious is person X, from 0% to 100% certainty?". On the fifth day, subjects completed a moral judgment task without discussion.

The control group took all tasks (the four nonmoral and one moral tasks) in the same sequential manner, but without discussion.

Moral Choice Task

The task was a modification of Rest's (1975) Defining Issues Test. Eight basic scenarios are given, each providing a choice dilemma involving conflicting moral principles. Instead of having the subject select rationales for their choices from a list, rationales were inserted in the scenario, each with a likelihood of occurance. So, subjects are asked for the strength of a bipolar choice (e.g., "Steal the drug (20)....Don't steal the drug (1)") given a certain likelihood of occurance (high or low) of a preconventional, conventional, and postconventional type consequence which supports the normatively morally preferred choice. Examples of these consequences include, respectively: "There is a high chance that Heinz will be caught and punished"; "There is a low chance that his family and friends will see stealing the drug as fullfilling his obligations to his wife"; and "There is a high chance that people will learn from his stealing the drug that life is more important than property".

In this manner, each scenario was the basis for a 2 by 2 by 2 design of high and low likelihoods of preconventional, conventional, and postconventional consequences. Eight sets of booklets were arranged by cyclical permutation so that each booklet contained a complete design of the eight combinations of consequences, one combination to each scenario. Across the eight booklets, each scenario was ultimately paired with each consequence combination. In short, combinations of the high and low likelihoods of the three types of consequences were balanced across the eight scenarios.

Scale scores were arranged so that higher scores represent stronger choice of the more normatively moralistic choice in each dilemma.

Training Tasks

Comparisons between training and control groups, and between responses to a task before and after discussion in the training group were made to determine whether discussion induced changes in reasoning on the nonmoral tasks. In the first task (serving in an experiment), the trained group weighted cost of serving more after discussion than before [Time X Cost interaction $F(1,31)=4.30$]. While there were no differences between the groups before discussion, afterwards the trained group weighted need more than controls [Group X Need interaction $F(1,62)=3.97$]. Training did not affect complexity on the first day's task. In the second task (cheating) again the two groups did not differ in prediscussion judgments, but after discussion, the training group shouwed an interaction between severity of potential penalty for the cheater and strength of evidence, and the controls did not [Group X Evidence X Penalty interaction $F(2,62)=4.56$]. Training in complex reasoning was beginning to take effect! The third task required sentencing a defendant for car theft. For trained subjects, the difference in sentencing between mild and severe damages was greater when the defendant did not have serious intentions than when he did, both before and after discussion. This complexity did not appear for controls [Group X Intentions X Damage interaction $F(1,62)=9.41$] indicating that previous days' discussion had been absorbed by the third day. In the fourth task (murder mysteries) neither group showed configuration prior to discussion. After discussion, trained Ss showed the expected interaction, unlike controls [Group X Opportunity X Motive interaction $F(4,124)=4.40$], whereby opportunity matter more when a strong motive was present than when a weak one was given.

All in all, trained Ss appeared to have learned their lesson, and demonstrated more complex integration than did controls.

Moral Reasoning

Figure 1 plots all pairwise comparisons between rationales for the treatment groups. Higher scores indicate choices tending towards the more moralistic alternative. Unlike the case with traditional moral education (Kaplan, 1983), there was no tendency for trained Ss to uniformly choose more moral alternatives. However, trained Ss did combine the rationales in a more complex manner. Note that significant divergence occured for controls only in the left panel [Pr/Co interaction $F(1/31)=4.68$]. Otherwise, consideration of conventional and postconventional rationales, and of preconventional and post conventional rationales, was independent. For trained Ss on the other hand, all three panels show statistical and graphical divergence. In all instances, a high likelihood of any one outcome increased usage of other outcome rationales. For example, if there was a high likelihood that peers would support the more moral act, then likelihood of a principled consequence occurring mattered more (right panel). The curves give evidence of differential weighted averaging rather than a multiplicative integration rule since the latter would have led to a downward trend in the lower curves.

In sum, trained Ss used a consistent configural rule in combining rationales in their moral choices, while Ss who did not discuss the nonmoral tasks used a simpler rule.

There were no group differences in weight given to each rationale type. This is not surprising since training did not involve moral dilemmas, nor did it tackle the distinction between principles, social convention, or personal consequences as bases for action choices.

DISCUSSION

Moral education proponents target the process of making moral judgments as the goal of intervention, and not the values per se (e.g., Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). Research shows that class discussion of moral dilemmas leads to more moralistic choices, but without increase in relativistic reasoning (Kaplan, 1983). By specifically discussing configural use of cues, we induced a shift towards autonomous reality, that is, towards using rationales in a configural, relativistic way. And, by using nonmoral tasks for discussion, training did not impart moralistic values as a by-product. Reasoning complexity can be directly trained, and separately from moral values.

Comfort is given to the notion of the unity of cognitive development, or structural parallelism (Piaget, 1965; Tomlinson-Keasey & Keasey, 1974). Across the moral and nonmoral situations represented here, at least, subjects seemed able to apply rules learned in a donor domain to a recipient domain possessing parallel processes though different content.

The study shows the benefit of directly addressing weighting and integration rules by inspecting the pattern of choices made under varying likelihoods of attaining choice rationales. This systematic procedure for varying critical factors in moral decision making eliminates the problems inherent in relying on retrospective reports. Moreover, it is based on a clear distinction between reasoning (weights and integration rules) and values (strength of choice of moralistic alternative).

Finally, we recommend this method as a standard means for conceptually and methodologically distinguishing between the two components of moral decisions in a variety of contexts. It allows separately tracing developmental and training progressions in reasoning and in values.

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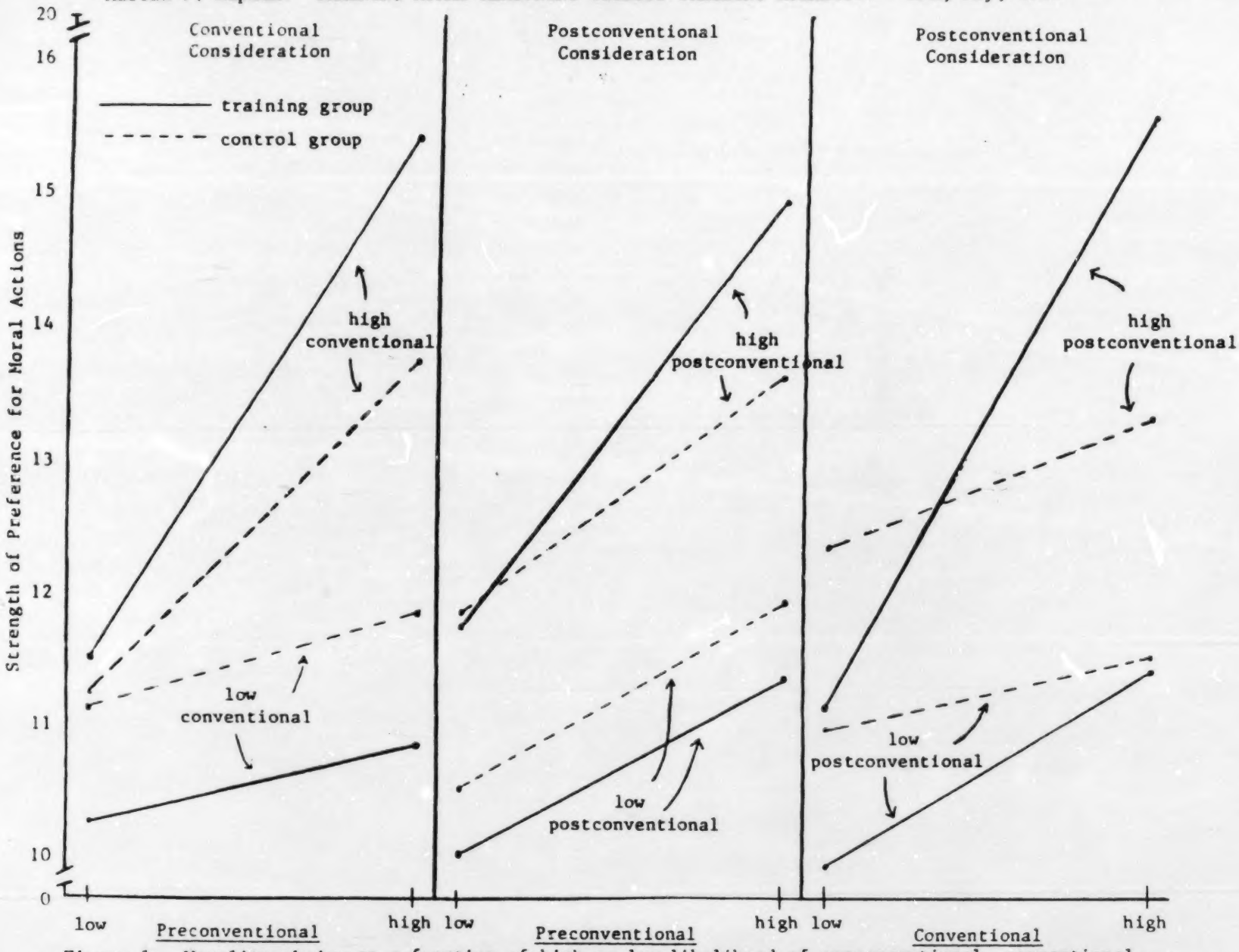

Figure 1. Morality choice as a function of high or low likelihood of preconventional, conventional, and postconventional considerations: Plot by pairs of considerations. Higher scores = greater moralism.